Project Presentation: "Narrating Neurons: Perspectives on Mental Illness in British and American Novels in the Age of Neuroscience"

(Roman Bischof, ICS colloquium "Life", 6 November 2020)

I would like to start my presentation by briefly summarising the basic considerations on which my project is grounded. In its core, it is an analysis of representations of mental illness in recent British and American novels in the light of increasingly influential neuroscientific models of human thought and behaviour. I am focusing on works from the past three decades, a time I call the "age of neuroscience" (though I am of course in no way the first person to do so). The core questions my study addresses are:

- In what ways do recent novels touching on the subject of mental illness reflect and challenge neuroscientific explanations of psychological conditions?
- How do such novels differentiate between *mind* and *brain*? (In other words, how do they reflect the mind-body problem?)
- What are the implications for notions of *illness* and *identity*? (Simply put: are forms of behaviour associated with mental illness treated as parts of a character's identity or as symptoms akin to those of physical illnesses?)

My corpus comprises novels by both British and American authors, namely Ian McEwan, Richard Powers, Siri Hustvedt, Nathan Filer, Matt Ruff, Bebe Moore Campbell and John Wray. I will explain more about this selection when presenting the structure of my thesis. First, I would like to provide some context by discussing two terms contained in my title (not "narrating neurons", though; this, I will save for later).

In this study, I use the term "mental illness", rather than "madness", a term still widely used in literary and cultural studies. These two terms are of course far from being perfectly congruent and there exist good reasons for preferring one over the other depending on context. In its most extreme, madness is metaphysical, incomprehensible and uncontrollable, while mental illness is physical, can be scientifically studied and medically treated. Since my project examines the interactions between literature, medicine and neuroscience, my main focus therefore remains on the concept of mental illness.

What I mean by the term "age of neuroscience" is a paradigmatic shift in cognitive sciences and philosophy of the mind at the turn of the 21st century. Due to a surge in neuroscientific discoveries, the mind has become increasingly regarded as a function of the brain rather than its own, metaphysical entity. Though contested, physicalist monism has taken up a stronghold in philosophy of the mind. Concomitantly, mental illnesses have become chiefly understood as diseases of the brain,

grounded in cellular (i.e. neural) networks, chemicals (e.g. neurotransmitters) etc. and thus biologically determined. Lastly, knowledge of mental processes in the age of neuroscience derives from studying the physicality of the brain rather than subjective experience or the interpretation of narratives. These tendencies, as we have seen, are to some extent questioned and countered in the medical humanities and in narrative medicine. Before I explore the relationship between novelistic representations of mental illness and neuroscience's increasing influence, I would like to present a few points of departure for my thesis.

Representations of mental illness or madness have featured all throughout the history of Western literature and culture and have been associated with a range of functions both within the respective works of art and within culture and society at large. As Lilian Feder notes in *Madness in Literature*, "literary interpretations of madness both reflect and question medical, cultural, political, religious, and psychological assumptions of their time, […] they explore the very processes of symbolic transformation of these influences and disclose their psychic consequences in the minds of individual characters or personae." (Feder 4) In her book-length study, Feder examines literary depictions of madness in Western literature from ancient Greece to the mid-twentieth century and concludes that "the theme [of madness] discloses […] the mind of the protagonist or persona incorporating the limitations and defences of its society at the same time that it exposes their effects" (286). I would like to take this quote from Feder to highlight two main points of departure for my own project. The first is the observation that depictions of mental illness in recent novels foreground the minds of individual characters and/or narrators. This invites discussions of the characteristics of representations of minds in novels, novelistic conceptualisations of mind and body in the age of neuroscience and, the notion of mental illness itself. On the other hand, the theme of mental illness in novels provides a critical view on society, especially practices in mental healthcare, including political issues and the stigma people with mental illness and their families and friends have to deal with.

In order to connect my presentation with the theme of today's workshop, I would like to highlight one particular theoretical focus of my project, namely the relationship between mind and body in literary representations of mental illness. As I focus on the way mental illness features in novels of what I call the "age of neuroscience" (though I am of course in no way the first person to use this term), one of my main questions is to what extent fictional narratives follow the physical monism which neuroscience seems to support: if the mind is solely a function of the brain and thus of the body, can mental illnesses be conceived of and represented in the same way as physical illnesses? Some critics claim that novelists have fallen into this trap of biological determinism in recent decades. Most notably, Marco Roth coins the term "neuronovel" for a developing genre of novels which reflect a cultural and scientific "shift away from environmental and relational theories

of personality back to the study of brains themselves, as the source of who we are". (n. pag.) Roth does not limit his definition of the neuronovel to novels depicting mental illnesses, though most of his examples fall into this category. Along with other critics, he uses the concept of the neuronovel to criticise current novelists for their lack of creativity. The main purpose Roth sees in employing mentally ill narrators or characters is for the author to gain a stylistic freedom similar to that employed by modernist writers. This freedom, however, is limited by the very nature of the illness it is based on, as "the very act of medicalization marginalizes the experimental impulse, marking any remnant modernism as a case for abnormal psychology" (Roth n. pag.). Gesa Stedman holds that current novelists "have not been able to find a [narrative] mode for the new ways of explaining consciousness and perception which neuroscience seems to offer" (123). My own observations are a bit more ambiguous. In my readings, I find that novels tend to highlight the limits of a purely neuroscientific understanding of the mind, rather than blindly following biological determinism. For instance, in Ian McEwan's Enduring Love (1997), Joe Rose meticulously studies his stalker's illness in order to predict his moves and convince the police (and his partner) that he is in danger. He fails on both counts – although his fear turns out to be justified – because his insistence on empiricism renders him incapable of engaging with other characters' points of views. In Jon Wray's Lowboy (2009), the police detective charged with finding a run-away teenager with schizophrenia seeks the advice of the boy's psychiatrist in order to predict his movements. The teenager's mother – diagnosed with schizophrenia herself – turns out to be of more help because she understands her son's mental processes on the basis of narrative rather than symptoms. In Richard Powers' The Echo Maker (2006), the famous neurologist Gerald Weber agrees to examine the victim of a road accident who has developed Capgras Syndrome (a rare condition which lets the patient believe his own sister is an impostor). Weber's failure to help with the treatment along with his emotional involvement with the case throws him in a personal crisis and leads him to question his whole career as a researcher. In different ways, these novels highlight subtleties of human action neuroscience cannot account for. At the same time, concepts derived from biological determinism, such as the epistemological authority of empirical insight and the professional authority of psychiatrists and neurologists are critically incorporated into the narratives.

Next, I would like to briefly summarise one theoretical focus which helps me address the relationship between mind and body in my readings of novels featuring the theme of mental illness. In terms of identifying narrative modes that reflect novelistic engagements with cognitive sciences, I rely on a relatively new branch of narratology, namely cognitive narratology. Particularly, Lisa Zunshine's application of the psychological concept of theory of mind and Alan Palmer's model of fictional minds provide intriguing insights, as they help to unearth hitherto neglected aspects of the mind in literary studies. Their focus on the importance of observable behaviour (expressions,

gestures, actions, …) for the construction of minds in fictional narratives provide access points for discussing the philosophical concept of enactivism (first discussed by Varela, Rosch & Thompson in *The Embodied Mind*).

According to Alan Palmer, classical narratology treats fictional minds as "consisting primarily of a private, passive flow of consciousness because of its overestimation of the importance of inner speech" (13). Informed by cognitive sciences and philosophy of mind, Palmer suggests an analytical framework which takes into account the relationship between thought and action and the importance of intermental thought for the representation of minds in fictional narratives. By creating a "continuing consciousness out of the isolated passages of text that relate to a particular character", Palmer argues, readers construct an "embedded narrative", encompassing "the whole of a character's various perceptual and conceptual viewpoints, ideological worldviews, and plans for the future" (15). Rather than analysing the representation of minds in fiction on the basis of thought representation alone, Palmer thus proposes to include all references to a character in fictional narratives as constitutive of that character's mind. Representations of speech, thought, behaviour, appearance and interaction with other characters work together to create an impression of a "continuing consciousness". Of course, versions of a character's mind may also become apparent in the minds of other characters or the story's narrator. Palmer calls such minds as construed by other minds within novels "doubly embedded narratives" (15). Instances which produce such doubly embedded narratives highlight the relational nature of fictional minds, i.e. the fact that minds in novels are not isolated entities, but that their representations may influence each other.

For Lisa Zunshine, the opportunity to exercise our mind-reading capabilities is the main reason why we read fiction. Like Palmer, she draws upon insights from cognitive psychology to define concepts which inform her engagement with fictional minds. The main concept she uses for her literary analyses is Theory of Mind. In psychology, Theory of Mind refers to the (often unconscious) human action of deducing states of mind from another person's behaviour. In fictional narratives, Zunshine argues, this deep-seated human mechanism is engaged and often tested (4). She suggests that "we may see the pleasure afforded by fictional narratives as grounded in our awareness of the successful testing of our mind-reading adaptations, in the respite that such a testing offers us from our everyday mind-reading uncertainties, or in some combination of the two." (20) Although it may be difficult to support the argument that exercising our mind-reading skills is the main function of fiction, applying the concept of Theory of Mind to literature helps to highlight the relationship between action and thought in narrative texts. Particularly in the case of characters with mental illnesses, this relationship may be skewed, making it difficult for readers to render a "continuing consciousness" or "embedded narrative" (to use Palmer's terminology).

In order to demonstrate the way in which the aforementioned theoretical considerations inform my analysis of contemporary British and American novels, I would now like to present an exemplary readings from Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997). As alluded to previously, the novel's autodiegetic narrator, Joe Rose, is confronted with a stalker whose mental illness (identified as "De Clérambault's Syndrome" by Joe himself) causes him to believe that there exist strong bonds of mutual affection between the two strangers. Despite Joe's determined rejection, Jed (the stalker) keeps trying to convince Joe of their love for each other. The constant phone calls, letters and hour-long vigils outside Joe's apartment building have deteriorating effects on Joe's mental state and the relationship with his long-standing girlfriend Clarissa. In his first letter to Joe, Jed recounts a gesture he witnessed and which he took as a secret sign off affection by Joe:

> When you came out of your house yesterday evening and you brushed the top of the hedge with your hand – I didn't understand at first. I went down the path and put out my own hand and fingered the leaves that you had touched. I felt each one and it was a shock when I realised it was different from the ones you hadn't touched. There was a glow, a kind of burning on my fingers along the edges of those leaves. Then I got it. You had touched them in a certain way, in a pattern that spelled a simple message. Did you really think I would miss it, Joe! (McEwan 96)

In this passage, we find both Palmer's concept of doubly embedded narratives and Zunshine's concept of theory of mind at play. The doubly embedded narrative is Joe's mind as it is represented in Jed's mind. The first-person account gives us insights into Jed's reading of Joe's mind. As Jed narrates his own thoughts in retrospect, he traces his process of interpreting Joe's actions as indicators of his mental state (and thus his affection for Jed). We are presented with an action which Jed does not understand at first and then comes to construe as a secret message of love , of which he is finally so convinced as to suggest the message was indeed easy to read . The thought of finding a hidden message in the way another person touches the leaves of a hedge is absurd enough to suggest Jed's theory of mind – his mind-reading capability – is impaired by his illness. To some extent, however, Joe is complicit in this misreading, as his interactions with Jed leading up to this incident oscillate between direct confrontation (understood by Jed as fearful denial) and different strategies of evasion. In other words, Joe's conduct invites the love-stricken Jed to look for signs, be they as small as the touch of a leaf.

Joe, on the other hand, relies on biological determinism to read and predict Jed's thoughts and actions. Infuriated by the fact that neither the police nor Clarissa (his girlfriend) acknowledge the threat he sees emanating from Jed, Joe finds solace in his discovery of the psychological condition called 'De Clérambault's Syndrome': "The name was like a fanfare, a clear trumpet sound recalling

me to my own obsessions. There was research to follow through now and I knew exactly where to start. A syndrome was a framework of prediction and it offered a kind of comfort." (McEwan 124) In *Enduring Love*, both the presumably sane Joe and his mentally ill antagonist display obsessive behaviour and thus forms of irrationality. The novel therefore puts into focus the ambiguous nature of clearly delineated categories of mental health and illness and highlights the difficulties in representing and understanding minds.

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